Field Reports

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AN INVESTIGATION OF THE *ORANG-PENDEK*, THE "SHORT MAN" OF SUMATRA

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INTRODUCTION

In July, 1989, I arrived in southwestern Sumatra, a large Indonesian Island, with the intention of producing travel features on the area—I am a freelance writer. I had no previous knowledge of the "Short Man," and was intrigued to learn of the possible existence of the animal known locally as *orang-pendek*.

It was not until my return to Britain that I learned that reports of an as-yet unrecognized bipedal primate have persisted throughout this century in the mountainous central spine of Malaysia and the high rain forests of northeastern Borneo. However, nowhere do these reports seem more firmly anchored in reality than in the montane rain forests of the remote Kerinci region of southwestern Sumatra (Fig. 1).

The Kerinci region lines in the central southern part of the Barisan mountains of western Sumatra. The area takes its name from a 12,500 foot (3,800 m)-high active volcano. The rain forests there are among the richest surviving in Southeast Asia; they contain large mammals, including the Sumatran tiger, the Sumatran rhinoceros, the Malayan tapir, the sun bear, and the siamang ape. A total of 3.7 million acres (1.5 million ha) of virgin rain forest have been declared as the Kerinci Seblat National Park—one of the largest yet least known or penetrated such reserves in Asia.

FIG. 1.—Sumatra, a large Indonesian Island, is the location of many reports of a human-like bipedal primate named *orang-pendek*. The author collected information on this supposed animal from villages in the Mt. Kerinci region (see arrow).

Many more millions of acres of rain forest remain as yet untouched by commercial interests—although a French gold mining consortium is pressing for exploration licenses in the area. Away from the densely-populated Sungeipenuh valley, it is possible to trek for up to a week in dense, high altitude rain forest without encountering either a village or a road.

NARRATIVE DESCRIPTION

I arrived in Kerinci in July, 1989, spending three weeks in the area. I returned in September for a further two weeks. My introduction to the Short Man came one July day at dusk on the slopes of Mt. Kerinci, although I had already come across the name *orang-pendek* in a guide book; it described the animal as a "legendary hairy hominid which terrifies the local population."

From our camp site at 11,150 feet (3,400 m), we could see the Indian Ocean—perhaps 100 miles (160 km) to the west—and my guide, Jamruddin ("Din"), pointed out areas where rhinoceros and tiger are commonly found. He then indicated, quite casually, that, in the densely-forested mountains east of the crater lake of Mt. Tujuh (Fig. 2), one could sometimes see *orang-pendeks*. I commented that one never seems to meet anybody who had actually seen such mythical beasts first-hand. He seemed a little surprised, but then admitted, apologetically, that he had "only" seen an *orang-pendek* twice. Din then went on to give a detailed description of the animal. It was, he said, still common, although becoming rare in the Mt. Kerinci area—possibly due to incursions by local farmers.

Over the next weeks, I became increasingly intrigued as I visited settlement after settlement seeking further information. In the increasingly densely-populated region around the foothills of Mt. Kerinci, villagers reported no local sightings of *orang-pendeks* in more than three years, although hunters reported seeing them on rattan-gathering forays into the forest. In the lower-lying Sungeipenuh valley, the animal seems quite unknown. Only in the more remote villages, high in the hills, are recent sightings of the animal reported.

After two weeks, it seemed that the most likely area in which to find proof of the animal was an untracked wilderness east of Mt. Kerinci and south towards the market town of Bangko (Fig. 2), which lies on the Trans-Sumatran highway. Despite offering well over the normal guide price, I did not succeed in finding a guide willing to take me into this region.

The people of villages such as Palompet and Kersiktua insist this area is the habitat of a big cat they call *cigau*. Described as being slightly smaller—but apparently more heavily-built—than the Sumatran tiger, the *cigau* appears to prompt real fear among the hunters of Kerinci—the only animal to produce such a reaction. They claimed the *cigau* attacks without provocation. "*Cigau* hates man," I was repeatedly told.

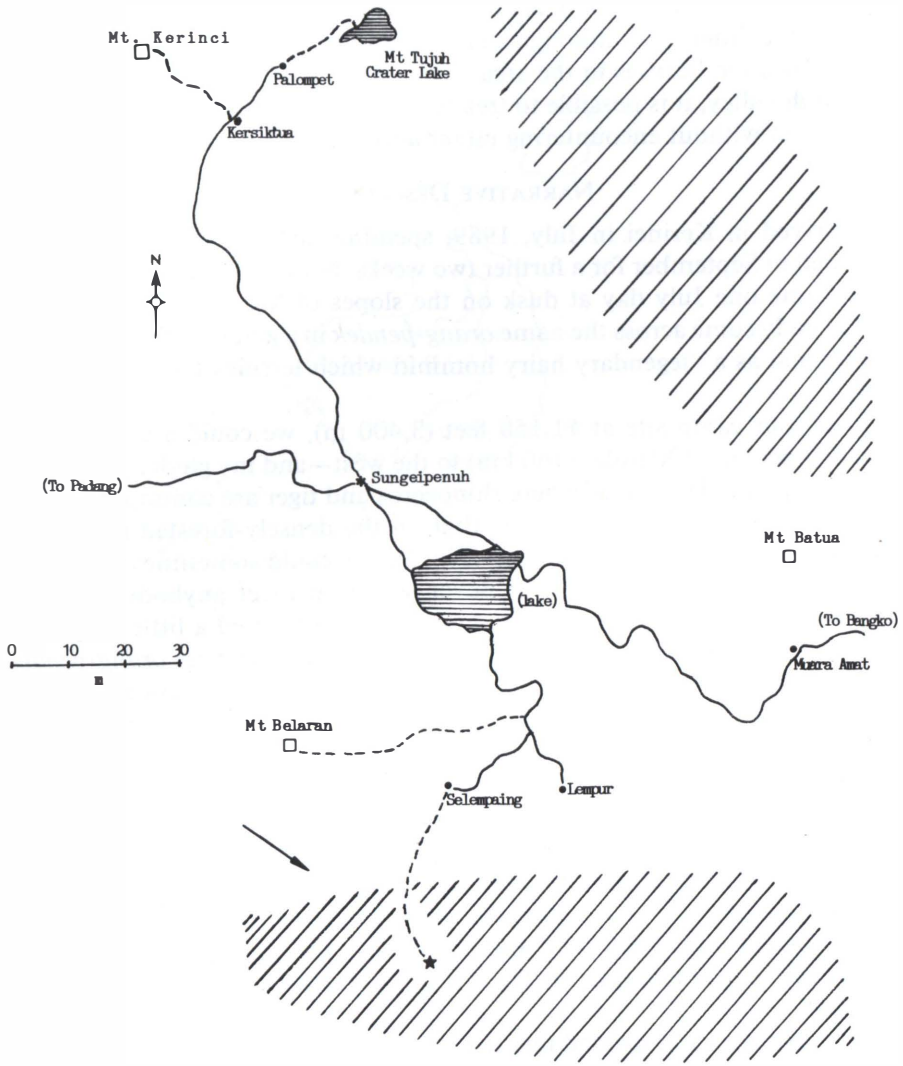

FIG. 2.—The Mt. Kerinci region, showing villages visited by the author. Diagonal shading indicates areas where native people believe *orang-pendeks* live. These areas are in high and remote heavily-forested mountains. The broken line south of Selempaing indicates trek taken by author to where *orang-pendek* tracks were found—see arrow. (Scale only approximate; map not necessarily authoritative.)

Despite this setback, I was able to gather a detailed description of the *orang-pendek* by talking to headmen in villages up to 60 miles (100 km) apart. The older men were more helpful. The younger village men appear reluctant to enter the forest, and on the two occasions that I hired young

guides, they succeeded in getting lost—a not very pleasant experience. The *orang-pendek* is described by these older witnesses as ranging from 3 to 5 feet (1–1.5 m) in height. The forehead is high, and the ears are more prominent than those of the siamang. All reports included the information that the animal has a large and prominent belly—something not mentioned in previous literature on the subject. The animal was described as heavily-built, not the slender little creature I was later to see illustrated in a book by Bernard Heuvelmans (1958, *On the Track of Unknown Animals,* Ruper Hart-Davis, London).

A number of native people remarked that, although the Short Man normally boasts a long, black mane of hair extending almost to the base of the spine, in some cases this mane may be dark yellow or tan. The body is covered in a light coating of black or dark-grey hair, thicker on the limbs than the body. Villagers initially insisted that the animal has arms the same length as in humans. However, when questioned further, it became plain that the index finger extends to, or just below, the knee.

One witness, an elderly *dukun* or traditional doctor living in a settlement near Muara Amat, provided the additional comment that, when running, the Short Man may hold out his arms (for balance?). All witnesses insisted that *orang-pendeks* are bipedal, although some sources claimed that they walk with their weight placed on the outer edge of the foot. Not one person suggested that *orang-pendeks* have reversed feet. I placed least credence in reports in which hunters claimed to have seen *orang-pendeks* in the forest, since it is possible they may have seen sun bears or siamangs. The most reliable sightings—five—were from villagers who had seen an *orang-pendek* in their *ladang* fields at the edge of the rain forest. One of these sightings came from the Mt. Kerinci area, near the village of Palompet. The remainder came from settlements in the area around the small town of Lempur, 33 miles (54 km)—two hours by bus—southeast of Sungeipenuh. All these sightings appear to have been made before 7 a.m. and after 3 p.m. In all but one reported sighting, the animal had been feeding on sugar cane; another report involved feeding on bananas. Villagers said they thought that the *orang-pendek* lives on the forest floor, although it clearly does utilize the trees.

One 32-year-old man, from near Palompet, described his sighting thus: "I was in my grandfather's house [a bamboo hut] in his fields, and looked out and saw two *orang-pendeks.* One was bigger than the other. They were eating sugar cane, I went out to look at them more closely. The big one saw me. Then they both ran away. They ran away like a man. Quite fast." Upon further questioning, the witness stated that the *orang-pendek* looked like a small, hairy human. He also stated that the animal is not a human, but also insisted that it is not a monkey. He became offended, as were other villagers, when I suggested that it might be either a sun bear or a siamang. Witnesses

also dismissed the suggestion that their sightings were of members of the primitive aboriginal Kubu tribe.

The presence of a second *orang-pendek* appears in a number of reports. However, no villagers informed me of having observed an infant or juvenile.

As time passed, I changed my method of questioning—quite shamelessly—in a bid to prompt certain answers. "He is the same as *orang-utan,* isn't he?" I would suggest. Such suggestions were greeted with a degree of outrage. There are no recorded sightings of orang-utans in southwestern Sumatra. That ape species, so far as is known, is restricted to just one area of northeastern Sumatra. Villagers also firmly denied that they could have mistakenly identified a sun bear or a siamang. Both animals are common in Kerinci, and my witnesses insisted they knew the difference between an *orang-pendek* and a siamang or a sun bear.

One elderly resident of Palompet insisted on demonstrating the difference between a siamang—caught rifling his sugar canes—and an *orang-pendek:* "*orang-pendek,* walks like a man; *orang-pendek* is not a monkey *ibu* [Lady]," I was told by a deeply affronted village elder.

There appear to be no mystical properties attached to the *orang-pendek* of Kerinci. Also, had even one villager told me that the *orang-pendek* kidnapped women or curdled milk, I would probably have dropped my investigation.

At the end of July, I left Kerinci and travelled firstly south, to Bengkulu Province, where I spent some time in the region of Curup and the Bukit Kaba volcano. Virtually no rain forest survives in that area, and villagers appeared to know nothing of *orang-pendeks.* It was only later that I learned that Bukit Kaba was the site of one of the most famous European accounts of an *orang-pendek* (Heuvelmans, 1958, above). From there, I travelled north to Padang, and then to Bukitinggi, in the Minangkabau, some 155 miles (250 kms) north of Sungeipenuh. Once again, *orang-pendeks* appeared quite unknown—although, upon my return to Britain, I was to learn, again, that the animal had been reported there in the early years of this century.

At the beginning of September, I traveled south to Kerinci once more, where I met the headman of Selempaing village (see Fig. 2). He claimed that a female *orang-pendek* had been seen twice in his village fields within recent weeks. With the rains fast approaching, and my Indonesian visa expiring at equal if not greater speed, I made my way to Selempaing, in the mountains, some 30 miles (50 km) southwest of Sungeipenuh—via possibly the worst road in Sumatra. The village is located at around 3,600 feet (1,100 m) above sea level, on the edge of virgin rain forest. There are few trails of any description, and reaching the village involves not only climbing steep ridges, but fording fast-flowing rivers and suffering the constant attentions of leeches. A *parang* (machete) is essential.

There are a number of Sumatran rhinos in the area. I was also told, on

FIG. 3.—Heavily-forested river valley in which the author found *orang-pendek* tracks, one day's trek south of the village of Selempaing.

my first evening in the village, that a local man had been taken by a tiger two years earlier. Since our protection consisted of the village headman's small air-rifle, this did little for my self-confidence.

My guides, the Selempaing headman and a former rhino poacher named Musih, had warned me that it could be weeks before I might see an *orang-pendek.* I reassured them that all I wanted was some evidence of the animal's existence. They were disbelieving when I explained that *orang-sarjana*—scientist man—did not know about *orang-pendek.* Musih said he believed it would be possible to catch an *orang-pendek* using a snare or a net, but said no local people would cooperate if any harm came to the animal. He also insisted that, if an *orang-pendek* were caught, it should be released, and not removed from the forest. I concluded that there is some sort of taboo against killing or injuring this animal.

A full day of trekking south, deep into the mountains, took us to a heavily-forested river valley at an altitude which I estimated to be at around 4,600 feet (1,400 m) (Fig. 3). There we found tracks of what appeared to be two different *orang-pendeks* (see Fig. 2). This assumption was based not on foot size—they were virtually identical—but on the depth of the different tracks on the soft forest loam. There was no possibility that either of my guides had made the tracks.

At one point, I followed the tracks up a steep, muddy bank above a fast-flowing stream for almost 40 yards (36 m) before losing them in a drier area. I concentrated on one particular set of tracks. Each print was clearly delineated, the big toe and four smaller toes easily visible. The big toe was placed as it would be in a human foot. The foot had a clearly-defined high, curved instep. It measured just under 6 inches (15.2 cm) in length, and fractionally under 4 inches (10.1 cm) at the widest point of the ball of the foot. The heel was narrow and well-rounded. If we had been reasonably close to a village, I might have momentarily thought the prints to be those of a healthy seven year-old child.

The ball of the foot was, however, too broad even for a people who habitually wear no shoes, and I also dismissed the possibility of the tracks having been made by Kubu tribespeople.

I am 5 feet, 3 inches (1.6 m) tall, and my left foot is almost exactly 9 inches (23 cm) long. Following this relationship, I calculated that the source of these tracks had therefore been rather smaller—a little over 4 feet (1.2 m) tall. That would make it smaller than the *orang-pendek* described both by the villagers I questioned, and, as I later discovered, by Heuvelmans. However, *orang-pendek* means "Short Man" in Malay, and there are few Kerinci people who are more than 5 feet, 7 inches (1.7 m) in height. It seems therefore reasonable to assume that the native people would not describe an animal as "short" unless it was noticeably smaller than they. The animal's reported broad shoulders and large stomach would increase its appearance of bulk.

I took a number of photographs of the tracks, but they turned out to be of no value due to the poor light and heavy rain conditions. I also made two plaster casts of the tracks, only one of which survived the difficult trek back to Sungeipenuh, and the headquarters of the Kerinci Seblat National Park. I had left Sungeipenuh with the good wishes and frank disbelief of the Park's Director, who did not believe in *orang-pendek* because the local people were "simple." Three days later, I limped back into his office bearing a large and muddy plaster cast. Within an hour, the Director and his deputies expressed agreement that the cast I had taken appeared to come from the track of an animal they did not know. They accepted the fact that it was not from a sun bear or a siamang.

We agreed that the cast should be sent for further examination to the headquarters of the Indonesian National Parks Department, in Bogor. Unfortunately, despite a number of requests, their conclusions have not been forthcoming. Regrettably, I had mistakenly assumed that, since I myself had been able to find a number of tracks of *orang-pendek,* there would be a considerable volume of writings on the subject, and that there would also be plaster casts available. Had I realized at the time that this was not the case, I would have retained the surviving cast, and I also would have taken more care in photographing the actual tracks.

Results

What is the *orang-pendek?* Not, it would appear—in at least some cases—a siamang or a sun bear, although I would expect a proportion of Short Man sightings to be mistaken identifications. I can state that the tracks I followed were not deposited by either a siamang or a sun bear; they appeared to have been made by a bipedal primate. They were essentially human-like in all but the fact that they were too broad.

After a total of seven weeks in Sumatra investigating this animal, I established that it appears to be restricted to the Kerinci region of Sumatra, although it seems likely that a similar form is also found in northeast Borneo.

In reviewing all my evidence, as well as the historical evidence, I assign a probability of about 80 percent to there being an unknown bipedal primate surviving in the high rain forests of southwestern Sumatra. If it is ground-dwelling and elusive, as it is reported to be, this could explain how it has escaped zoological notice, and is known only to the native people. I do not believe that it is more than distantly related to the orang-utan.

Future Plans

I plan to continue my investigation of the *orang-pendek* in Sumatra, and I hope to return to Kerinci for this purpose before long, possibly in 1991. I would welcome any specific advice from ISC members on the next phase of my investigation.